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## A trial begins in Rome, testing more than men

**I**N ROME, AMID LOVELY WEATHER and joyful ceremonies, a strange criminal trial has begun. It will take months to complete. Italy's justice is very different from America's, leaving a lot more power to judges. The atmosphere around the case is charged with international drama at the highest possible levels. It's also loaded with one of earth's fiercest mass passions: Political paranoia.

What's it all about?

Mehmet Ali Agca, 27, is *not* on trial for shooting Pope John Paul in St. Peter's Square on May 13, 1981. He's already been convicted of that. He's serving a life term. No one really questions that he did it.

He is one of the four defendants present in the courtroom. (Four others are being tried in absentia.) But the technical charge against him is nothing more than smuggling a 9-mm. Browning automatic into Italy. That's the kind of rap New Yorkers can understand—and could even before Bernie Goetz turned up.

Agca is a Turk with a slimy record involving killing, narcotics and bizarre intrigues. Today, he stands in the court as the main witness, more importantly than as a defendant.

**H**IS POSITION, UNLESS HE CHANGES it again, is that the assassination plot against the Pope was a contract job by the Bulgarian spy corps. Agca claims Bulgarian officials, working through Turkish mob figures, put up the equivalent of \$1.2 million for the hit, though there's some argument that it was more like \$300,000. The contract: Blow away the most powerful religious leader in the world, in sight of the Vatican.

If that allegation of the Bulgarian role should be true, nobody on earth who can find his or her way to the corner store could doubt it was planned and approved at the top level in Moscow. Bulgarian espionage is to the Soviet Union what Charlie McCarthy was to Edgar Bergen.

Agca has a credibility problem. Since his arrest, he's sung more different songs than you could hear on a good Sunday in the birdhouse at the Bronx Zoo. Monday he told the court and the world that he is Jesus Christ and went on with that babbling yesterday. He also said that he's omnipotent—which even Jesus didn't claim to be last time He was on the earthly scene. Agca announced the end of the world. That's a revelation that's worn out most of its charm, even among those harmless vagabonds—cherished New Yorkers all—whose placards used to decorate Times Square.

That makes it easy to kiss off Agca as a loony with nothing left to lose. And that is appealing to everybody who for one reason or another would like to wipe away all indications of political intrigue in the case—portraying Agca as a kind of Byzantine John W. Hinckley Jr.

And that brings the arguments down to what the trial in Rome is really all about.

**I**T IS, BEFORE THE WORLD, a test of Italian justice and the Italian government. Agca's testimony, standing naked, is not about to convince anybody. But there's a lot of complicated other evidence around. Bit by bit, if it's handled right, it will—it must—add up to the substance of the trial and everything that's gone into preparing for it.

Do the Bulgarians, and the Soviets, take seriously the implication that they attempted to rig the assassination of the Pope—ostensibly because of the massive influence of his hatred for Communism among Poles and other subjects of Soviet tyranny?

The Bulgarian government is branding the whole thing a U.S. Central Intelligence Agency plot. Izvestia is trumpeting a series of articles titled "Anatomy of a Provocation." So what's new? The Politburo's not about to plea-bargain with a Rome prosecutor. And would anybody expect it to?

No. But...

The connections between Agca and his established contacts are too solid to be dismissed as nothing but right-wing paranoia. Tying them in convincingly will be a tough challenge for the Italian authorities. It will be a long trial, and a well-watched one.

**T**HE OUTCOME WILL NEVER BE absolutely, finally beyond debate. What's happening in that Rome courtroom is not the Stanley Cup playoffs. That's the nature of international intrigue, of espionage and counterespionage, of propaganda and counterpropaganda.

Still, history demands, and the people of the world deserve to know, the truth: the closest, most immediate approximation of the whole truth and nothing but the truth as is possible.

That's a heavy and historic burden for Italian justice—and for the objectivity of the people who are watching this dead-serious Roman circus most closely.